

Mediawatch

A right royal rumpus Bernard Dixon

People in more mature democracies may wonder why the British media disseminate so feverishly the opinions of someone described as ‘His Royal Highness’. Puzzlement was doubly justified recently when *The Daily Telegraph* published an article — flagged by other newspapers with headlines such as “Charles warns against genetic foods” — which it then largely demolished in an editorial.

Prince Charles opined that the genetic engineering of crops “takes mankind into realms that belong to God, and to God alone.” Not so, said the editorial, citing the bible in support. Regarding the idea of genetic engineering being unnatural, it pointed out that modern cereals were the products of intensive plant breeding and that milk came from cows modified to lactate in such quantities that they would now barely survive without human care.

The newspaper might have added that bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), irrelevantly instanced by HRH to dramatise his case, would probably never have arisen if animal feedstuffs had been as tightly regulated as genetic manipulation. It could also have highlighted his ironic failure to realise that biological solutions facilitate, rather than frustrate, the royal desire to eschew pesticides and other agrochemicals.

As the *Daily Telegraph* ran not only the leader but also a critical commentary by science editor Roger Highfield, it is hard to see why the original article was published at all. Among Highfield’s telling points, he observed that “to walk away from technologies that can improve the quality and quantity of the world’s food supply is perverse.”

The press, radio and television furore surrounding HRH’s “Seeds of disaster” essay was only one example of the way in which the UK media have begun to talk-up alleged public alarm over recombinant DNA work in plants. *The Independent*, for example, published a substantial piece headed “Fears multiply over growth of genetic farms.” Yet this was simply an account of the increasing number of UK sites where transgenic crops are being grown, with a photograph of campaigners camping in a field. It contained no evidence whatever to support the assertion in the headline.

“Should genetic engineering be stopped?” was the Talking Point question on *BBC News*’s website in response to HRH’s pronouncement. Coming just after “Is this the end for the Spice Girls?”, the item said that genetic engineering could produce “more deaths from new and more resilient diseases.”

“Why I’m happy to ‘play God’ with your food”

So who came well out of this farrago? Clearly not HRH, and certainly not the editors and columnists who contributed momentum to the bandwagon. More often than not, they simply amplified Prince Charles’ misunderstandings. The weekend following the royal intervention, Andrew Marr was telling readers of the *Observer* that “this technology has arrived remarkably quickly and is being commercially exploited with all the cool reflection of a gold rush.” Perhaps science editor Robin McKie will inform Marr that the development of recombinant DNA has proceeded with unprecedented caution and regulation — over the past 25 years.

Even the *Independent*, having sensibly commissioned plant scientist Jonathan Jones to write an

article explaining the many benefits of transgenic plants, topped it with a title (“Why I’m happy to ‘play God’ with your food”) which was at best ambiguous and at worst mischievous. An accompanying editorial failed to correct HRH’s errors of fact and understanding. Instead it concluded, quaintly, that the monarchy should be “above controversy.”

The highly unlikely hero of the affair was in fact the chemicals giant Monsanto. This is the very company which has angered not only environmental organisations but also Zeneca Plant Sciences by deciding not to separate its genetically modified soya so that products can be labelled accordingly.

Coincident with HRH’s outpouring, Monsanto launched a £1 million advertising campaign explaining the benefits of plant biotechnology. And so confident is Monsanto in the science and in the task of winning public confidence that it is publicising alternative viewpoints. The glossy advertisements include contact details for Friends of the Earth, while the website provides a searchable database of reports, data and articles from organisations such as Greenpeace.

A week before the interventions of Monsanto and Prince Charles, and largely ignored by the UK press, citizens in Switzerland overwhelmingly rejected a proposal to ban field trials with transgenic crops and the use of transgenic animals. Voting in a national referendum after many months of vigorous debate in the media and elsewhere, they clearly opted for the benefits of modern biotechnology and were unconvinced by the counter-arguments.

Perhaps this result will presage the outcome of the public debate that both Monsanto and the Prince desire in the UK — yet which both have reason to fear.

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